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AUTHOR Beach, Richard
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effect of reading ability on 60 seventh-grade students' narrative writing quality, use of descriptive and evaluative t-units, use of storytelling linguistic cues, degree of revision, and between draft self-assessing inferences about intentions, problems in fulfilling intentions, and predicted revisions. Subjects wrote two autobiographical incident essays with a 6-week interval. For each task, the subjects began with prewriting activities involving selecting and exploring an event, then completed a first draft. On the third day of the assignment, they divided their drafts into thirds and completed a guided self-assessing form asking them to infer intentions, problems in fulfilling those intentions, and predicted revisions for each of the three sections. Next, they revised the draft. All drafts and self-assessing forms were read and rated by three trained evaluators. Results indicated that reading ability had an effect on the quality of personal incident writing, ability to infer intentions, use of descriptive t-units, and use of "tellability" cues. (FL)

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# The Effect of Reading Ability on Seventh Graders' Narrative Writing

Paper presented at the

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Session 44.24: Factors Influencing Writing

Richard Beach
350 Peik Hall
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Mn. 55455

CS 007 200

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The Effects of Reading Ability on Seventh Graders' Narrative Writing

Richard Beach

Session 44.24, AERA Annual Meeting

Purpose of the study

Little research has examined the influence of reading ability on students' personal-incident, autobiographical narrative writing or their ability to critically assess their narrative writing. The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the effect of reading ability on 7th grade students' narrative writing quality, use of descriptive and evaluative t-units, use of storytelling linguistic cues, degree of revision, and their between-draft self-assessing inferences about intentions, problems in fulfilling intentions and predicted revisions.

Related theory: reading ability and writing narratives

Examining the empirical relationships between reading and writing should be based on some theory as to how proficiency in reading contributes to certain specific writing skills. In terms of this study, this theory needs to explicate the knowledge and skills better readers bring to their writing that would results in superior narrative-writing quality. It assumes that readers acquire knowledge of text conventions and skills from reading that are also employed in writing. At the same time, this theory recognizes that writing ability stems from a range of different factors, only one of which is reading experience.

Knowledge and skills unique to writing personal-incident narratives For the purpose of this study, narrative writing is defined as writing

autobiographical narrative about a specific incident. In writing these incidents, writers need to use concrete details in order to "show" rather than "tell" what occurred in the event. Writers use dialogue and concrete descriptions of persons and settings to portray the setting, events, and persons. Writers acquire this "show, don't tell" literary convention from their reading of literature. In writing about their own experiences, better readers may therefore be more apt to develop characters or events through the use of dialogue, description or concrete details than poorer readers.

Writers also portray their own attitude towards an event through their use of comments or asides about thoughts and feelings. Rather than simply report a series of episodes, a writer uses these comments or asides to convey the significance or relevance of these episodes to the main idea or point of the event. For example, rather than simply report on his behavior, "I got up on my skies and sped across the lake," a writer may also add, "After ten failures in getting up, I finally was able to do it--I was thrilled." Adding the descriptive detail, "after ten failures in getting up," and his comment or reflection about the episode, "I finally was able to do it--I was thrilled," conveys the significance of the event--the fact that he was finally successful after so many attempts.

Sentence functions employed in narrative Cooper's analysis (1983) of sentence functions employed in narratives found that three basic types of sentence functions predominated: "narrate" (stating actions), "describe" (providing descriptive details), and "evaluate" (stating feelings or judgments about the actions). Cooper (1983) found developmental differences in the use of "narrate," "describe," and "evaluate," sentence

functions; older writers are more likely to employ "describe" and "evaluate" functions to elaborate or comment on actions. These "describe" or "evaluate" sentences, like the linguistic cues, serve to dramatize the unusual or extraordinary nature of the specific reported actions. Elaborating the "narrate" sentences with "describe" or "evaluate" sentences therefore serves to convey the point of the story.

Use of linguistic cues The writer's narrative therefore has a point that makes it worth telling, endowing the narrative with what Labov (1972) defines as "tellability." A narrative's point or "tellability" often derives from fact that the event is unusual or extraordinary, a violation of social norms (Labov, 1972; Pratt, 1976). In order to convey the fact that an event constitutes an unusual or extraordinary occurrence, a writer employs certain comments or asides that dramatize the unusual or extraordinary nature of the event. Based on his research on oral anecdotes, Labov isolated several basic types of these linguistic cues. For example, the word, "finally" in the above example suggests the significance of the event--that after repeated attempts, he succeeds. These cues ("You wouldn't believe what happened...," "we had never seen anything like it") serve to accentuate the unusual or extraordinary nature of an event in both oral and written discourse.

Better readers are better able to infer the gist or intentions of text than poorer readers (Brown and Smiley, 1977; Winograd, 1983). If better readers are better able to infer their intentions, they may be more likely to employ Labov's linguistic cues in order to convey the point or the "tellability" of a narrative. Thus, better readers may be more likely to employ cues that convey the point of their narratives because they are better able to infer their own intention.

If better readers are better able to infer the point of their narrative, they may also be more likely to employ "describe" or "reflect" sentences that serve to develop the "narrate" sentences. These "describe" and "reflect" sentences add additional details and comments that accentuate the unusual or extraordinary aspects of the specific events in the narrative. Descriptive details and comments also convey the significance of particular episodes to the point of the larger experience.

Ability to revise drafts Better readers' ability to define their own intentions may also influence the extent to which they revise their drafts. In order to critically assess one's draft, a writer perceives disparities between their intentions and the text and then revise the text until they achieve their intended meanings. Problem-solving models of revision (Flower and Hayes, 1981) posit that writers infer intentions or goals, define problems in achieving these intentions or goals and then predict appropriate revisions consistent with the intended meanings. College students who are able to define their intentions are better able to define problems and employ the appropriate revisions in order to improve their drafts (Beach and Eaton, 1984). It may then be the case that because better readers are better able to define their intentions, they will be more likely to employ revisions that improve the quality of their drafts than poorer readers.

However, students often have difficulty making intention or goal inferences about their own writing. When asked to infer their own intentions or goals, college students often simply summarized the content of their draft rather than infer their intentions or goals (Beach and Eaton, 1984). Without a clear sense of the intended meaning, these

students had difficulty had no basis for judging the relevancy or sufficiency of information relative to their intended meaning. It may then be the case that younger students, who lack the cognitive skills necessary for abstracting about intentions or goals, may also have difficulty making intention or goal inferences.

Quality of narratives Better readers' ability to infer their intentions may therefore be related to their ability to employ cues and "describe" or "reflect" sentences to dramatize tellability and to revise their drafts, all of which may result in narratives of higher quality than those written by poorer readers. 7th and 8th graders who were taught summary skills with expository texts improved not only in their comprehension but also in their ability to produced well organized expository texts (Taylor and Beach, 1984). Better readers demonstrated more improvement than poorer readers. As readers improve in their ability to infer the point or intention of their narratives, the quality of the narratives improves; Vardell (1982) found significant differences in 6th, 9th and 12th graders' ability to infer intentions of their own and a published detective story. These differences in the ability to infer intentions were related to the quality of the students' detective stories, as determined by judges' ratings of the overall story quality.

Determining correlations between intention and writing quality This research suggests that the ability to infer intention has some relationship to writing quality. In trying to explain the relationship between reading and writing ability, it may therefore be usefule to determine the correlations between the ability to specify one's intention and elements of narrative writing quality.

Knowledge of literary conventions and writing narratives It may also be the case that, in addition to differences in the cognitive skill of inferring intentions, better readers have acquired a more complete set of literary conventions constituting the character and story development than have poorer readers (Beach and Brown, in press). For example, better readers may be more cognizant of the "show, don't tell" convention--the need to portray characters or persons in narrative by employing concrete behaviors or dialogue rather than simply "telling" readers about a character. In writing their own personal incident autobiographical narratives, better readers may therefore be more likely to develop their own "past self" through the use of specific character behaviors. As documented by extensive story grammar research, better readers may also have developed a more complete knowledge of the conventions constituting the components of story development: use of background setting and development of events in a story (Black, Wilkes-Gibbs and Gibbs, 1982). Better readers may therefore write narratives in which the main figure or "past self," the background setting and the events in the narrative are more completely developed than is the case for narratives written by poorer readers. While a number of studies have examined the relationship between reading ability and writing of expository texts (Atwell, 1980; Birnbaum, 1981; Flower, 1983; Taylor and Beach, 1984), few studies have examined the relationship between reading ability and narrative writing.

Questions addressed by this study

This study examined the following questions regarding the relationship between reading ability and writing personal-incident

narratives:

What is the effect of reading ability (high vs. low) and version (first vs. second) on:

1. judges' mean ratings of development of the main figure, the event portrayed, background setting and the central point?
2. the total number of t-units employed and the mean percentage of t-units categorized by judges as "narrate," "describe" and "evaluate" out of the total number of t-units employed in the narrative?
3. mean percentage of linguistic cues used per t-unit, cues designed to convey tellability (Labov, 1972)?
4. judges' mean ratings of degree of revision?
5. judges' mean ratings of the ability to specify intention, disparity between intention and text and predicted revisions.

What is the relationship between the ability to specify intention and development of the main figure, the event portrayed, background setting and/or the central point?

Procedures

60 seventh grade students in two junior high English classes in a suburban, working class community outside Minneapolis, Minnesota wrote two autobiographical incident essays with a six week interlude. The two identical assignments were employed in order to enhance the reliability of the analysis. For each of these two tasks, students started with

prewriting activities involving selecting and exploring an event. On the second day, they completed a draft. On the third day, they divided their drafts into thirds and completed a guided self-assessing form (Beach and Eaton, 1983) asking them to infer intentions, problems in fulfilling intentions and predicted revisions for each of the three sections. They then revised their draft.

Three trained judges each read all drafts and rated each of three sections or thirds of final drafts using four 3-point rating scales ("little," "some," "extensive") for development of the central figure, the event, background setting and main idea. They also compared the draft sections, rating them on a three point scale for degree-of-revision ("little," "some," "extensive"). The ratings for the draft sections were then combined to produce one final draft quality rating for each of the four scales and one degree-of-revision scale rating. Inter-judge reliability was determined using the Cronbach alpha produced agreement scores for the quality ratings in the .75 to .80 range.

The judges also analyzed the students' self-assessing forms, rating the students' intention, problem in fulfilling intention and predicted revision inferences using three-point "degree-of-specificity" rating scales ("not specific," "somewhat specific," "highly specific"). The judges rated the "degree-of-specificity" for students' ratings across each of the three draft sections. Inter-judge agreement ranged from .72 to .81.

Two judges then rated each t-unit in final drafts according to one of three categories derived from Cooper's (1982) sentence function category system: "narrate," "describe" and "evaluate." Inter-judge agreement was

.83. The mean percentages of t-units within each of these three categories out of the total number of t-units was then determined. Two judges also counted instances of the use of four categories of linguistic cues identified by Labov (1972, as dramatizing "tellability": "intensifiers," "comparators," "correlatives," and "explicatives." Inter-judge agreement was .82. The percentage of t-units containing cues was then determined.

According to standardized reading test scores on the California Achievement Test, students were assigned to high vs. low reading ability groups, resulting in 30 students in each group. 2 x 2 ANOVA's (reading ability x version) were run to determine the effects of reading ability and version on mean quality, inference and revision ratings, the mean percentages of "narrate," "describe" and "evaluate" categories, and the mean percentage of t-units containing narrative cues.

Results

Quality and degree-of-improvement ratings Reading ability had a significant main effect on mean ratings for development of the event ($F = 14.7$, $p < .001$); better readers had a mean rating of 1.70 and poorer readers, 1.52. Reading ability also had a significant main effect on development of background setting ($F = 10.2$, $p < .002$) (high ability = 1.68, low ability = 1.49) and development of the main idea ($F = 5.9$, $p < .01$) (high ability = 1.67, low ability = 1.51). (see Figure I). Version (1st vs. 2nd assignment) had no significant main effect on any of quality ratings. Reading ability had no significant effect on development of the central figure or on degree-of-improvement revision ratings. Thus, better

readers developed the events, background settings and main ideas more so than were poorer readers.

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Place Figure I about here

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Self-assessing inferences Reading ability also had a significant main effect on mean ratings for specifying intention ($F = 9.20$, $p < .003$); there were no significant main effects on specifying problems or predicted revisions. (See Figure I). Better readers were better able to specify their intentions than poorer readers. Reading ability had no significant main effect on specifying problems or predicting revisions.

Correlations between the ability to specify intentions and writing quality across all subjects for each of the three separate draft section quality ratings were as follows: degree of intention specificity and development of the main figure: .32, .32, and .39; development of the event: .12, .13, .12; development of background setting: .12, .18, 16; and development of the main idea: .22, .31, .29.

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Place Figure II about here

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Sentence functions and linguistic cues Reading ability had a significant main effect on the total number of t-units employed for the two papers ($F = 14.1$, $p < .001$). The high ability readers wrote papers with more t-units (20.2 and 18.3) than low ability readers (14.6 and 12.7) (see Figure II). Reading ability also had a significant main effect on the mean percentage of t-units categorized as "narrate" ($F = 5.90$, $p < .01$); poorer readers employed a higher percentage of "narrate" t-units (62% and 61.1% for the two versions) than did better readers (45.9% and 49.7%). At the same time, reading ability had a significant main effect on the mean percentage of t-units classified as "describe" ($F = 3.8$, $p < .05$); better readers employed a higher percentage of "describe" t-units (28.7% and 31.6%) than did poorer readers (23.4% and 22.7%). There was no significant main effect for reading ability on the mean percentage of "evaluate" t-units; however there was a significant interaction effect ($F = 3.8$, $p <. 05$); a Scheffe post hoc test indicated that better readers on the first versions employed a significantly higher percentage of evaluate t-units (22.1%) than they did on the second version (13.3%) or than the poorer readers on either version (14.1% and 14.5%). In summary, poorer readers were more likely to develop their narrative by a string of "narrate" or action t-units than better readers, while better readers employed a higher percentage of "describe" or "evaluate" t-units than poorer readers.

Reading ability also had a significant main effect on the mean percentage of t-units containing "tellability" linguistic cues ($F = 9.4$, $p < .004$); 22.7% and 23.45% of the better readers' t-units contained cues

as compared with 13% and 12% for the poorer readers.

Interpretation of the results

Quality, degree-of-revision and self-assessing ratings The results indicates that reading ability had significant effects on quality ratings for development of the event, background setting and the main idea. There are several possible explanations for these effects. One explanation has to do with the cognitive skills better readers bring to their writing. As the data indicates, better readers were better able to infer their intentions than poorer readers. With a clearer sense of their intentions, better readers would presumably have a clearer sense of direction for developing or revising their narratives.

However, the data only partially supports this "goal-setting" explanation. The correlations between ability to specify intentions and the writing quality were in the .30 to .10 range; the highest correlations occurred for development of the central figure, a scale on which their were no significant reading ability effects. These relatively moderate to low correlations suggest that the ability to specify intentions may be only one of several factors related to reading ability that influences writing quality.

The fact that better readers were better able to define intentions did not mean that they were better able to use their intention inferences to self-assess or revise. Intention or goal defining is only one of many necessary components in the self-assessing process leading up to revision. While reading ability did have an effect on specifying intentions, there were no significant effects on specifying problems in fulfulling

intentions or in specifying appropriate revisions for dealing with those problems. This may have been one reason that reading ability also had no effect on the degree of revision ratings--while better readers were able to specify their intentions, they may not have been better able than poorer readers in completing the self-assessing stages of defining problems or predicting revisions that would lead up to making revisions. Or, it may be the case that while better readers are better able to infer intentions, that does does necessarily mean that they apply their skills to writing tasks. Recent research by Tierney (1983) examining specific cognitive skills (goal-setting, planning, summarizing, revising, etc.) involved in elementary-grade students' reading and writing indicates that better readers do not necessarily apply their reading skills to writing and vice versa.

In order to further pursue the complex interrelationships between reading and writing skills, it may be necessary, rather than simply block readers according to a reading test, to examine specific cognitive skills employed specifically in reading texts, in producing texts and in self-assessing/revising texts. What may emerge from this research is that some subjects transfer their cognitive skills from reading to writing and back more efficiently or effectively than other subjects. It would then be possible to determine if the ability to produce what were judged to be "higher quality" readings or analyses of one's own or others' texts resulted in "higher quality" writing of one's own text.

Prior knowledge of literary conventions Another explanation for the differences in writing quality concerns differences in prior knowledge of literary conventions constituting story development. One of the many

reasons the better readers developed their event and background setting more effectively than poorer readers was that they may have been more knowledgeable of the techniques and strategies involved in story development. The fact that better readers employed more "describe" and (on one paper) "evaluate" t-units and linguistic cues suggests that these readers may have been more knowledgeable of the "show, don't tell" literary convention and techniques for dramatizing the point of their story, which may have resulted in higher quality stories.

However, it is difficult if not possible to directly measure tacit knowledge of literary conventions. Again, in order to better explain the relationship between reading ability and written story production, it would be useful to examine specific reading skills (the ability to recognize the use of techniques for developing a story or background setting) as related to the use of these techniques in story production. This would provide a more specific determination of the relationship between reading skills and writing quality.

Sentence functions and linguistic cues As previously noted, reading ability had a significant effect on the mean number of t-units, the use of "narrate," "describe" and (with one paper), "evaluate" t-units as well as the use of linguistic cues. The poorer readers' essays typically consisted of a string of "narrate" sentences ("I did X, I did Y, I did Z") without the descriptive details or the reflective comments employed by the better readers. Devoid of descriptive details or the writer's own feelings or thoughts about the actions, their narratives may not have conveyed to the judges the necessary information for understanding the event, setting and main idea of the narrative. In contrast, the better

readers' descriptions and comments about the actions may have improved the quality of the narratives.

The better readers may have employed more "describe" or "evaluate" t-units because they had, as the analysis of the intention inferences indicates, a clearer sense of their own intention than the poorer readers. Because they wanted to convey a particular point or about their past experience--the fact that they were nervous about a "first try" or that they wanted to prove something to an adult--may have meant that they added those descriptive details, comments or feelings that would communicate their point
to their reader. The fact that they also employed more "tellability" cues conveying the unusualness or extraordinary nature of their experience than did poorer readers may reflect differences in their ability to define their intention.

However, as was the case with differences in writing quality, factors other than ability to define intention may be related to the use of descriptive details, commentary and cues. The use of "describe" or "evaluate" t-units and cues also may reflect differences in knowledge of literary conventions. The better readers, in adding descriptions, comments and cues to the actions, were functioning more in the role of narrators as constituted by the conventions of written literary discourse. The poorer readers, in simply reporting the events without such embellishment or elaboration, were, to some degree, transcribing or dictating oral discourse. It may be the case that better readers are more cognizant of the differences between written and oral narrative discourse, particularly in terms of the role of a narrator.

Summary

In summary, reading ability had an effect on the quality of personal incident narrative writing, ability to infer intentions, use of descriptive and evaluation t-units and use of "tellability" cues. The results of this exploratory study suggests the need for research in a number of areas:

1. interrelationships among narrative elements Further analysis needs to be conducted on the various possible relationships among narrative writing quality, sentence functions, cues, self-assessing inferences and degree-of-revision both within and across reading ability level groups. It may be the case that, for better readers, the interrelationships among these elements are stronger than for poorer readers.

2. relationships between specific skills involved in both reading and writing Rather than blocking readers according to test scores, it would be more fruitful to examine specific skills readers employ in reading literary texts--inferring intentions, predicting outcomes, explaining characters' actions, etc.--as related to their use of similar skills in producing and assessing their own stories. It may be the case that certain skills transfer more readily from reading to writing or vice versa than do other skills.

3. developmental differences in knowledge of literary conventions Better readers may differ from poorer readers in their story production due to differences in prior knowledge of literary conventions. However, it is

difficult to determine differences in prior knowledge of conventions. One alternative method involves analysis of readers' at different age levels who have different levels of background literature reading or instruction experience, assuming that these readers have acquired different levels of knowledge of literary conventions. This investigator's current research of autobiographical narratives written by the 7th graders in this study, college freshmen and adult English teachers indicate that adult writers employ higher percentages of "describe" and "evaluate" t-units and more "tellability" cues per t-unit than do younger writers, reflecting possible developmental differences in knowledge of literary conventions, in addition to differences in cognitive and social development.

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Figure I

High vs. Low Reading Ability Students' Mean Ratings for Story Writing Quality, Degree of Revision, and Self-assessing Inferences For Two Personal Incident Narrative Essays

| | Reading Ability Level | |
|---|---|---|
| Rating scales | High | Low |
| Development of: | | |
| central figure | 1.41 | 1.36 |
| event | 1.70 | 1.52* |
| setting | 1.68 | 1.49** |
| main idea | 1.67 | 1.51*** |
| Degree of revision | 1.46 | 1.44 |
| Degree of specificity for | | |
| intention | 1.74 | 1.53** |
| statement of problems | 1.30 | 1.33 |
| predicted revisions | 1.34 | 1.27 |

* $p < .001$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .05$

Figure II

High versus Low Reading Ability Students' Mean Number of t-units, Percentage of Sentence Functions and Tellability Cues Employed on Each of Two Personal Incident Narratives

| | Reading Ability Level | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High | | Low | |
| Criteria | Paper I | Paper II | Paper I | Paper II |
| # of t-units | 20.2 | 18.3 | 14.6 | 12.7 |
| % of "narrate" t-units | 45.9 | 49.7 | 62.0 | 61.1 |
| % of "describe" t-units | 28.7 | 31.6 | 23.4 | 22.7 |
| % of "evaluate" t-units | 22.1 | 13.3 | 14.1 | 14.5 |
| # of cues | 22.7 | 23.4 | 13.0 | 12.0 |